

The 'Aha' Experience with Somatics: Demonstrating Mind and Body Unity

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Abstract

An “Aha” experience can change the person’s belief system, lead them to awareness and increase their sense of control, which than can enhance confidence and competence. The opportunity to have an ‘aha’ experience can be enhanced. The ‘aha’ process usually includes getting ‘stuck’ before mental relaxation, an accepting environment and then resolution or insight. The ‘aha’ experience is often evoked through Somatics because the experience is felt instead of explained. These experiences may help shift the experience of how the mind and body interconnect. Using experiences such as lemon imagery, airplane, threading the needle, arm lift by partner, and Feldenkrais foot movement, the mind-body unity is experienced. The participants shift from belief to knowing because they have felt/experienced the process.

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When I observed my arm rotating further, I know, and not just believe, the importance of relaxation. It is world of difference!

Evoking hope, seeing now options and new possibilities are often the result of an “aha” experience: An experience that re-organizes the person’s reality and reframes problems and solutions from different perspectives. A perspective, that is often outside the initial frame of reference. Many educational, therapeutic and somatic approaches trigger “aha” experiences to further growth. This article reviews some of the major research observations about the ‘aha’ experience and offers some somatic exercises to demonstrate and evoke an ‘aha’ perception of mind-body unity.

Most practitioners, teachers, clinicians, or therapists have had the experience that their participants, students, patients or clients experienced an ‘insight’, ‘illumination’ or sudden understanding of knowledge or information: the ‘aha’ effect. What seems to be a simple ‘aha’ or “now I see or understand”, is a very complicated process. Sudden insight or ‘aha’ has been studied for over a century with research and theories about its effects and its underlying psychophysiological processes. We propose that ‘aha’ experiences are natural ways to help individuals become aware of their internal processes and to understand how mind and body affect each other. Additionally, when people learn through insight or ‘aha’ the information is better remembered, most likely because it is self-generated and experienced (Auble et al 1979). In short, the *‘aha’ experience can change the person’s belief system, lead them to awareness and increase their sense of control, which than can enhance confidence and competence.*

Some individuals believe that the ‘aha’ experience is something that just comes, without effort or intent, as if a gift of the gods suddenly drops upon one and the problem is solved or a new understanding is reached. Not true! Conti et al (1996) indicated that there may be a personality predisposition that makes it easier for some to develop ‘aha’ but more importantly, *that training, experience and task motivation can enhance creativity or ‘aha’*.

1. The ‘aha’ is a part of the creative or problem solving process and has a process of its own.¹ The ‘aha’ experience is the third stage of the creative thought or problem solving process (Wallis, 1926):

There is generally is an impasse in understanding or solving problems before insight or ‘aha’ occurs (Jones, 2003). Most likely when people relax their self-imposed constraints, it allows them to see the larger chunked items and decompose them so that the information becomes ‘insightful’. When a person can not solve a problem or see what appears to be a simple relationship, it is believed to more related to inappropriate or misleading information, rather than incomplete information (Knoblich, et al, 2001). *This suggests that the practitioner should be prepared for participants to become ‘stuck’ before they are able to understand, re-integrate or perform the requested information or skill. Also, the instructor should refrain from providing new or more information but rather try to help the participant ‘let go’ and see the information in a new light.* Using brain measurements Jausovec (1997), reported that ill-defined problems demanded more mental activity during the preparation phase but less mental activity during the solution

1. For a comprehensive review of problem solving and the ‘aha’, we suggest reading the chapter by Davidson (2003).

phase. Hence, the practitioner should have participants do the thinking, the planning, and the interpreting of information at the beginning of new tasks/skills. *Then, after all the information has been presented and processed, the participants should relax so they can allow new connections or perceptions to occur without rational editing.*

Somatics is a powerful approach that often includes the 'aha' experience instead of explanations, the 'aha' experience is a felt state. This felt experience then anchors a different perspective or s even an alternative reality. The challenge is to use this 'aha' or felt experience', not so much as a game, but as a new perspective from which to view one's self and the world. This new perspective of mind/body unity then forms the base which underlies and directs a participant's future actions. For example, now experiencing that imagery affects physiology, I chose not to watch the predominately violent news before going to sleep.

Following are some examples of somatic techniques that we have used evoke the 'aha' effect as it pertains to body/mind unity.

Example 1 Lemon Imagery

What does it demonstrate?

Our thoughts and feelings affect our body. Be careful what you think and imagine!

Gently close your eyes and imagine a lemon. Notice the deep yellow color, the two stubby ends, the sign "Sunkist" stamped on the side. Place the lemon on a cutting board and cut the lemon in half with your favorite kitchen knife. Notice the pressure of the knife in your hand as you cut the lemon. Feel

the droplets of lemon juice sprinkling against your skin. After cutting it in half, put the knife down and take one of the half lemons in your hand. As you look at it, notice the droplets of lemon juice glistening in the light, the half cut seeds, the outer yellow rind, the pale yellow-white inner rind, and the pulpy membranes containing the lemon juice. Now get a glass and squeeze this half lemon so that the juice goes in the glass. As you squeeze, notice the tension in your hand and arm. Feel the droplets of lemon juice squirting against your skin. Hear the plopping of the seeds and pulp. Smell the pungent, sharp, tart odor. After having squeezed this half, take the other lemon half and squeeze the juice out of it into the glass...Then put that lemon half down, and take the glass in your hand. Feel the coolness of the glass. Bring the glass to your lips, tilt the glass and feel the pressure and coolness on the lower lip. Now tilt the glass more, feel the juice against your lips, then open your lips and sip the lemon juice. Then taste and swallow the lemon juice. Observe the pulp and seeds as you swallow.

As you listened to this, did you notice that you swallowed, that you experienced an increase in salivation? More than 95 % of people who listen and participate in the above instructions experience these changes.

Example 2 Airplane

What does it demonstrate?

Specific muscle relaxation improves flexibility and that the mind ('letting go concept' and imagery) may improve muscle control

Stand in a relaxed stable posture (one foot slightly ahead and feet separated should width apart). Stay in the same place until you are asked to move.

--Pretend that you are an airplane. Bring your wings (arms up) and rotate as far as they can (without moving your feet) and note a spot on the wall as to how far you can comfortably rotate. Do this 2-3 times. Stand straight, relax and let your arms drop.

--Stay in the same foot position. Just let go of the facial muscles, shoulder muscles and hands. Tighten each of these muscle groups for 10 seconds and let go for 15 seconds. Repeat two times. Breathe diaphragmatically in which your stomach expands during inhalation and decreases in circumference during exhalation. Let the chest and shoulders stay relaxed. Breathe diaphragmatically for two minutes and slowing the breath to about 6-breaths per minute.

--Now while staying totally relaxed and breathing, bring your arms up so that they are wings again and while exhaling rotate as far as you can go.

--Keep the same foot pattern with your eyes closed, gently raise and lower the airplane wings a few inches. Then, as you raise and lower the airplane wings, rotate back and forth. Repeat a few times and relax letting your arms drop to your lap. Finally open your eyes raise your airplane wings and again rotate as far as you can.

In almost all cases, one can rotate each time you did the measurement. Sometimes it is easier to do this with your eyes closed to reduce embarrassment or visual disruptions. This demonstrates how relaxation of the body influences

flexibility. If appropriate, one can ask participants if any of their problems are due to psychosclerosis—hardening of the attitudes?

Example 3 Threading Needle²

What does it demonstrate?

People hold their breathe when performing fine motor skills and they have no awareness of doing such.

Sit comfortably, now imagine that as you put on your shirt, the middle button fell off and that you quickly have to sew it on. Get a needle with a very small eye. Hold this in between the thumb and index finger of your left hand. Take a white thread with your right hand and hold the thread between your right thumb and index finger. Bring the tip of the thread to your lips. Whet the thread to make it into a point and then thread the thread through the eye of the needle. Now act out this threading of the needle. Really hold this imaginary needle in front of you, bring the tip of the thread to the eye of the needle. Literally see yourself threading the needle.

As you are focused and involved in this task, what is happening to your shoulders, the blinking of your eyes, the location and frequency of your breath, the muscle tension in your back, legs, arms and fingers?

In almost all cases, people would notice that during precise accurate work (imaginary threading of the needle) they do not blink, held your breath, raise your shoulders and tense your whole body making it more and more immobile,

² Adapted from: Peper, E. & Weijman, A.C.M. (2003).

Example 4 Arm lift by partner

What does it demonstrate?

Social judgment and memories stiffen the muscles.

Do this practice with a partner. With the partner sitting or standing take your right hand and move the hand and arm in an unpredictable pattern without the person helping or hindering the movement. Allow the arm to feel like a heavy weight. As you are moving the arm and the person allows the arm to be moved, ask the person to think of a past or present memory of conflict or fear.

The moment the person remembers or thinks of it, the arm stiffens and the movement becomes impeded.

Example 5 Feldenkrais Foot movement³

What does it demonstrate?

Changing a coordination pattern associated with a reflex in one part of the body may change the muscle coordination pattern in another part of the body. The hipbone is connected to the thighbone.....

Be sure to continue breathing diaphragmatically: relax your eyes, jaw, neck and shoulders while doing the movements. After each movement, rest for a few moments.

-- Push away from the keyboard and sit at the edge of your chair with your knees bent at right angle and your feet shoulder width apart and flat on the floor (remove high heel shoes).

³ Adapted from a demonstration by Dr. Brad Bennett.

- Gently arch your head backwards by looking up and back to the farthest spot behind you on the ceiling. Remember that spot. Bring your head forward and upright. Relax and rest for a few seconds.
- Gently slide your left foot six inches forward and then, while keeping the heel of your foot on the floor, lift the ball of your foot up (flexing the ankle) while at the same time curling your toes under. Hold for one second. Then uncurl your toes, bring the ball of your foot down and relax.
- Gently slide your left foot six inches backward and then, while keeping the ball of your foot on the ground, lift your heel up (extending the ankle) and, at the same time, curl your toes upward. Then relax your toes, bring your heel down and relax your foot completely.
- Continue the movements by sliding your left foot forward and lifting the ball of your foot while curling your toes under. Then let it go and relax and slide your foot backwards while lifting your heel and curling your toes upward.
- Repeat this practice 5 or more times until the movement feels comfortable and smooth.
- Practice the same sequence five or more times with your right foot until the movement feels smooth and comfortable.
- Repeat doing the movement with both feet at the same time, except that as the right foot goes forward while lifting the ball of the foot and curling toes under, the left foot goes back while the heel goes up and the toes curl up. Continue for 10 to 20 times.

-- After you are done with both feet, let them rest on the floor with your knees bent at about 90 degrees. Then gently arch your head backwards by looking up and back to the farthest spot behind you on the ceiling. Observe how much further you could look back. Return your head forward, and notice the looseness and freedom in the movement of your neck and head.

In almost all cases, one can look significantly further back after this exercise.

Discussion

Somatic practices often include covert strategies to evoke “aha” experiences that can change people’s perspectives. Instead of using words to explain the phenomena, the somatic experience is felt. The concepts can not be negated, you have experienced them, and if you deny them then you deny your own existence.

There are many other practices and strategies that can be used to facilitate and evoke an “aha” experience. Often more success occurs if the following factors to enhance awareness are also incorporated in the practices:

1. Eliminate competition: Only compare the person with her/himself not others.
2. Maintain a positive mood state.
3. Approach the task as play and exploration and not as therapy or teaching. It is often difficult to reduce striving when being taught or during therapy as there is a goal to achieve.
4. Use a listening accepting communication style: Allow the person to express ideas/fears while the teacher/therapist/coach maintains a non-judgmental attitude.

In summary, the more the instructor or practitioner creates an accepting environment, the more likely the person will experience an 'aha' in which mind and body are truly unitary. The experience will move from belief and knowledge to felt and experienced understanding.

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